

THE DARK CITY

ALEXANDRA TOWNSHIP

by Jack Unterhalter

Perhaps it was called the Dark City because for decades there were no lights at night in the uneven, unpaved and broken ways that served as streets. But the darkness of savage crimes may also explain the matter, because for years this settlement, north of Johannesburg and just outside the municipal boundary, was held in thrall by the Spoiler Gang and the Msomi Gang, who threw the bodies of their victims into the nearby Jukskei River. The darkness still persists, as this tale will tell.

There was a portion of the quitrent farm "Cyferfontien" No. 2 in the District of Johannesburg, transferred to Gert Pieter Johannes Labuschagne by deed dated the 31st March 1875. In 1905 the portion known as Alexandra was transferred to Alexandra Township Ltd., the name "Alexandra" being that of King Edward VII's queen. On the property a township was laid out, consisting of 388 lots, 2 parks and a square, in addition to streets. It was intended for occupation by white persons, but the lots were not sold and the township company then decided that properties in the township, to use the elegant language of the deed of transfer, "shall not be sold, leased or otherwise disposed of excepting to a native or person of colour, provided that an Asiatic shall not be included in the terms 'native or Person of Colour'"; and "that no Asiatic or European shall be allowed to reside or carry on business of any nature whatsoever on the . . . property . . ."

Although ordinarily an African may not purchase land outside certain scheduled areas, this prohibition did not apply in regard to a township established prior to the commencement of Act No 27 of 1913, and it was therefore lawful for Alexandra Township Ltd to sell lots to black persons. And thus black persons acquired the precious right of freehold title to land when they purchased lots in Alexandra township. There were 2525 lots, nearly all of which had been sold in 1936 when the population in the area was about 16753.

Looking at the houses that remain today one sees among them structures of good and varied design, quite different from the monotonous patterns of Soweto. The streets, before the bulldozers came to break up the peoples' homes, were interesting because the dwellings were interesting, and relics of shops, schools and churches show that a vital community had used them.

But the backyards show another aspect. Miserable rooms crowd behind the main house and in these hovels lived the tenants of the owner of the land. He used the rentals for his living or to pay the interest on the loan of the monies he had borrowed to buy the lot or build the house. He was poor and so were they: and that poverty struck always at the township. For the squalid rear outhouses, occupied at low cost, created hopeless overcrowding in the area with great

problems of sanitation, water supply, roads and security; and the small means available to the owners of the land made it impossible to provide an adequate municipal fund from rates to give the services that keep a town or a village clean and healthy and safe.

In about 1916 a Health Committee was established and in 1921 the number of members on the committee was 11, of which 8 were Africans or members of the coloured community, who were elected to office by adult male residents of the townships and adult male owners of property there. In 1932 that Health Committee was disestablished and replaced by 7 nominated members, of whom 4 were white, 2 African and one a coloured person. In 1958 a local area committee of the Peri-Urban Areas Health Board replaced the Health Committee, the members of the new committee being white. An attempt was made to form a liaison committee of black persons to work with the Peri-Urban Areas Health Board Committee, but because of the hostility of the residents this failed.

The record of the old Health Committees was poor. The township was not rated to yield revenues in the way municipalities obtain their funds, and the standard of services was therefore bad. No significant assistance was given either by the Transvaal Provincial Administration or by the Johannesburg Municipality.

White persons had settled in the north-eastern suburbs of Johannesburg, and residents, resenting the presence nearby of the black community in Alexandra Township formed the North-Eastern District Protection League to campaign for the abolition of the township. Apparently this campaign was approved by the Johannesburg City Council because in January, 1943 it had adopted a resolution calling for the abolition of the township. The Alexandra Health Committee, of which the Chairman was the late Professor Hoernle, prepared a statement on the future of Alexandra Township for submission to the Minister for Public Health in reply to the proposal of the City Council of Johannesburg.

There were resolutions adopted at meetings of the joint council of Europeans and Africans, of the Johannesburg Coloured-European Joint Council and of the Yeoville District Rate Payers Association protesting at the uprooting of people and the expropriation of their property. Nothing came then of the proposal for abolition.

But the problems of the neglected area remained and when the Peri Urban Areas Health Board took over in 1958 it had a vast task of rehabilitation to perform. In those days one of the problems was the distance of the township from places of employment in Johannesburg and the consequent cost of transport to and from work. It was proposed to increase busfares and there was an angry

reaction from the people, a prolonged boycott of the buses and a daily procession of workers tramping the long distance to the City and tramping the weary return at night. After months of this defiant and courageous walking, settlement was reached, but the presence of the township loomed larger and the conscience of Johannesburg was uneasy.

In 1959 there were about 148, 000 people living in the township and pictures published in "Bantu" show dreadful conditions of the ruinous habitations. The Peri Urban Areas Health Board endeavoured to bring order out of chaos and the police contended with and finally overcame criminal gangs that had terrorised the place.

Again the spectre of abolition appeared, but this time it was the State that, in 1963, proposed the elimination of family accommodation in the township and the restriction of residence there to single persons to be housed in hostels. Again there were protests by concerned persons and the Minister was reminded that he had said in the House of Assembly that owners of property who are lawfully entitled to remain there are not being disturbed. Years before this, in 1954, the Natives Resettlement Act had been passed and a Board established to effect the removal of black persons from specified areas and to provide for their settlement elsewhere. The Board also had powers of expropriation. In 1964 the State President was given power to designate certain areas to make them, in effect, locations to be governed by similar regulations to those that apply in locations adjoining most towns.

The Peri Urban Areas Health Board made such regulations and these provided for rigid control of the issue of residential permits in the township, of trading activities, of public meetings and for the payment by owners of property of monthly fees in respect of health, medical, administrative and other services. Some measure of control of the township came about through these regulations but there was resentment of the fact that contraventions of the regulations were made criminal offences, more especially the failure to vacate premises and

the failure to pay the ownership levies. It was said that no criminal sanctions were visited upon white people for such failures outside the locations.

Over the years expropriations of properties in the townships took place and sales were negotiated to acquire the land from many of the residents. People were moved to Meadowlands, Diepkloof and Thembisa and there were many disputes as to the compensation to be paid. Of course for those who had lived in the dreadful slum conditions of the backyards, the moves improved their living conditions and I suppose many were grateful to have the modest homes to which they came.

Some years ago the West Rand Board assumed control of Alexandra township and since then removals have proceeded apace and hostels have been built. Many fears have been expressed about the presence in these hostels of large numbers of single men and single women. There are recollections of what happened in the Cape at the time of the Poqo riots when men were housed in such hostels; and there is fear in the homes that remain, because men from the hostels, it is said, roam the streets in a quest for women to rape. Are not these marauders themselves the victims of a distorted society?

Alexandra township is dying. The weeds are long and wild over the empty acres where once children played and families foregathered to talk and eat and sleep. The old busy thoroughfares are wasteland. Those who have gone have lost their freehold rights. They live now in townships where occupation is precarious because it may be lost if the head of the family loses his employment or absents himself from the site for more than 30 days without the permission of the superintendent.

The darkness over Alexandra township is the darkness of poverty and neglect and the darkness of the broken promise of freehold that has taken people away from their familiar surroundings, their schools and churches and the burial grounds of their ancestors.

Pray for light. □

VIGNETTE

Walking through the Supreme Court gardens,
I saw a young African woman
sitting on a seat beneath a tree.
She was handsome, well-dressed,
quietly self-composed.
"Can such a woman be bitter?"
I wondered.
"Can she feel that our society
has failed to be a benefit to her?
Surely she must be contented."

Her husband
inside the building
(I learned later)
was on trial for his life.

by Vortex